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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ESKISEHIR: AKP HOPES TO UNSEAT POPULAR DSP MAYOR

REF: ANKARA 125

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: As a modern industrial center in west central Anatolia, Eskisehir (literally "old city" in Turkish) belies its name. A city that many believed to be sinking into irrelevance and obscurity in the early 1990s, Eskisehir has been revived and transformed over the past decade, largely due to the vision and energy of Metropolitan Municipal Mayor Yilmaz Buyukersen, a former university professor and rector and member of the Democratic Left Party (DSP). During his two terms in office, the city's commercial center and riverfront have received a radical makeover, parks have been established, and a street-level tram system has been constructed to ease traffic congestion. Despite his accomplishments and personal popularity, Buyukersen faces a determined challenge from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in upcoming local elections scheduled for March 129. The AKP has zeroed in on Eskisehir as a city it can win in its effort to expand the power it holds at national level to provinces and municipalities where it has yet to break through. As the effects of the global economic crisis begin to bite throughout Turkey, the economy will undoubtedly be a critical factor in the minds of voters. Whether they hold AKP responsible at the national level or lash out against a popular incumbent mayor will be the key to the outcome, and could provide a useful barometer of Turkish voters nationwide. END SUMMARY

Eskisehir - A Modern "Old" City

¶12. (U) Eskisehir is a bustling city of about 600,000 residents, located in the Porsuk River valley that cuts through the hilly west central Anatolian plain. The city and surrounding area boast a long history. The original settlement of the area dates to the Phrygians in 1000 BC and a number of historic excavations can be found in and around the city. The period immediately after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century saw immigrants streaming into the city from far-flung parts of the empire from which they were forced to flee, especially the Balkans, and led to Eskisehir's strong focus on education and industry. The city's Organized Industrial Zone is Turkey's largest entirely self-contained and self-controlled industrial area, covering 8,000 acres and comprising nearly 500 businesses. Eskisehir has also been Turkey's aviation center, where F-16s were produced and where cooperation on aspects of the Joint Strike Fighter project is taking place.

¶3. (U) With the establishment of the Eskisehir Academy of Economics and Commercial Sciences, the forerunner to what is today known as Anadolu University, in 1958, Eskisehir set out to establish itself as a center for education as well, to help feed its industrial base with skilled engineers.

Buyukersen has spent most of his life building up the institution. Among the first of its graduates in 1962, he went on to post-graduate studies, a professorship, and eventually was chosen to serve two consecutive terms as university rector from 1982-1993, during which he pressed for a legislative changes authorizing Turkish universities to establish "open" (distance learning) faculties. Anadolu today is Turkey's largest university with over 800,000 students enrolled in on-line and other distance learning courses, and 26,000 on campus in Eskisehir. Only a change in the law limiting rectors to two five-year terms ended his leadership on the campus. Term limits opened up a new door to politics for Buyukersen, however, when then Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit called on him to run on the DSP ticket as municipal mayor of Eskisehir, reportedly saying to Buyukersen, "You have established a model university, now I want you to establish a model city."

¶4. (U) Winning the mayorship in 1999 with 44 percent of the vote, Buyukersen took Ecevit's instructions to heart and set forth to transform his city. Through a series of urban development projects, he built an electric tramway system, rebuilt the Porsuk River's banks through the city and adorned both sides with antique-style lampposts, statues, and new pedestrian and street bridges. Two large parks were established with artificial lakes, and a number of the city's historic Ottoman-era homes were refurbished, with some converted into museums and art galleries. A new arts and culture center, complete with theaters and an opera house was also constructed. The makeover has given Eskisehir's residents a new, strong sense of civic pride.

Buyukersen - Above Politics?

¶5. (U) Eskisehir's voters rewarded Buyukersen with a second term in 2004 elections, though he had to fight off a determined challenge by the AKP candidate. Running against a strong tide in which Turkish voters had shifted right and swept AKP into power in national elections in 2002, Buyukersen's inspired management of the city allowed him to increase marginally his vote in 2004, and he won 45 percent to 42. However, AKP candidates took a majority of the municipal assembly seats and captured the mayor's offices in Eskisehir's two constituent sub-municipalities, severely hindering his ability to pursue his own development projects in his second term.

¶6. (C) Buyukersen has won despite, rather than because of, his party affiliation. Turkey's DSP polls in single digits nationally and would not be present in parliament had it not entered into an electoral marriage of convenience with principal opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) prior to 2007 national elections. CHP chose not to run a candidate against Buyukersen in 2004 so as not to split the leftist vote and hand the municipal mayor's office to AKP. CHP pushed Buyukersen hard in recent months to abandon DSP and join CHP, the larger traditional bastion of Turkey's secular, liberal left. Buyukersen told us during a recent visit to the city that he turned down what he perceived as a demand by CHP, because he thought it would be unethical and because he believes Eskisehir voters see him as being above party politics. As a result CHP named its own candidate in the upcoming March race. Buyukersen said he remains confident city residents support him and that he will win a third term.

However, if just a few thousand traditional CHP leftist voters cast ballots for their party candidate, it could be enough to thrust AKP into power here.

Oblivious to the Needs of Lower-Income Voters?

¶7. (C) During a meeting with most of the AKP's provincial leadership, the party's Provincial President Salih Koca told us Buyukersen is perceived as having transformed Eskisehir, but much of that aura is creative fiction. "Eskisehir did not emerge overnight," Koca said, further accusing Buyukersen of having ignored the needs of conservative lower-income voters in the city's poor suburbs, which have yet to see the benefits of the mayor's makeover of the city center. He said those residents want equal access to services. "It's not enough just for people downtown to be happy." They need new roads, sewage systems, and storm sewers in those areas and AKP is banking on its strong nationwide reputation as service providers to propel its candidate, Professor Hasan Gunel, to victory.

¶8. (C) Three of Eskisehir Province's six members of parliament are from AKP, including Finance Minister Kemal Unakitan and parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Murat Mercan. With such heavy hitters representing AKP from the province (and city) in Ankara, the party will argue to voters in Eskisehir that Gunel can best deliver necessary funding from the central government. Koca said municipal budgets are set based on a formula predicated on population, so the central government's ability to sway appreciably the amount of central government funds to any particular municipality are slim. However, he pointed to improvements to the national highway bypass that have been made with funding secured by Unakitan, saying the city can benefit even more from that type of funding from Ankara if AKP is in a position to better rationalize and prioritize municipal funds from the mayor's office.

¶9. (C) Buyukersen countered that argument, saying voters are savvy and see through the AKP's bald attempts to buy votes. He pointed to AKP distributions of free coal and food packages in low-income areas, saying people resent the AKP having turned them into "beggars." "They'll take the handouts" he said, "but then they'll vote for me." Buyukersen pointed to the economic downturn in Eskisehir, and throughout Turkey, as the major concern on voters' minds. As a result, AKP will pay the price. He noted a large number of lay-offs from many of the factories in the city's industrial zone, especially in the automotive parts and appliance sectors. Retailers in town have felt the impact immediately, with a number of downtown shops as well as those in newly-built malls having been forced to close because of diminishing consumer spending.

Will the Electorate Vote Their Pocketbooks?

¶10. (C) Koca and other AKP provincial leaders agreed that the economic situation, rising unemployment, and their impact on ordinary citizens are weighing on voters' minds. However, they believe AKP's demonstrated efforts to assist low-income families and the party's strong governance at the national level will convince voters that the effects of the global economic crisis can best be overcome through AKP leadership. They also believe that well-educated Eskisehir residents also have other issues on their minds. Israeli attacks on Gazan civilians and broader instability in Turkey's region trouble Turks greatly, who have a very strong sense of justice. PM Erdogan's and AKP's performance in standing up for those in need, like the Gazans, and helping to solve these regional and global problems will help, they argue, convince voters that AKP is the party they can trust. Referring to the mayoral election, Koca said, "Personality is important, but so too is party politics and performance, perhaps even moreso."

¶11. (C) CHP provincial President Abdulkadir Adar argued the economic crisis is cutting away at AKP's support. Like the AKP, CHP has sought to turn these local elections into a nationwide referendum on AKP rule in Ankara, and Adar said CHP is anxious to prove that AKP support has crumbled to the point where early parliamentary elections will have to be called. He conceded Buyukersen has done well as mayor, though he attributed much of the mayor's perceived success to

a very good public relations effort. CHP had invited Buyukersen to run as its candidate, but when he refused, the party decided it could not enter a campaign it has sought to characterize as a nationwide referendum without fielding a candidate in one of Turkey's major industrial centers. Buyukersen may be vulnerable to AKP charges that the needs of those outside the city center have not been adequately addressed, according to Adar, and he may very well lose with CHP fielding a candidate that could split the vote on the Left. Nonetheless, CHP will run hard and let the results come out as they may.

¶12. (C) Yusuf Kizildag, Vice President of the Eskisehir Sugar Beet Cooperative, emphasized that ordinary people, especially farmers, are hurting economically and hold AKP responsible. In Turkey, many farmers live in towns and cities and commute out to their land to tend to crops. This means they live within the municipality and will vote. With 129,000 members, the Eskisehir Cooperative is among Turkey's largest and it provides its members pesticides, fertilizers, and equipment at cheaper prices through bulk tenders, and then processes the sugar from members' crops. Farmers are suffering from high prices for inputs and low prices for their produce. As a result, they're falling behind in paying their debts, which has a knock-on economic impact through the city and province.

Kizildag noted that Turkey is traditionally a "country of the Right" politically. Accordingly, the AKP has a built-in advantage in an election against a leftist mayor. However, Buyukersen's record has been excellent and, according to Kizildag, there isn't another politician in Turkey like him. "He turned this city into a European town in five years, bringing in tourism for the first time in Eskisehir's history." Under normal circumstances, Kizildag argued, nearly all residents would support the incumbent Mayor. But AKP, he charged, is "buying votes" with its free hand-outs, which could impact the race. He also accused AKP of using the investigation into the Ergenekon "deep state" conspiracy as a way to take voters' minds off of the crumbling economy and other problems like corruption in government. However, in the end, he speculated CHP voters would still back Buyukersen over their own candidate and AKP would lose support over the economy.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Eskisehir City and Province are at the ideological center of Turkish politics: a leftist mayor cohabitating with AKP sub-municipality mayors and an AKP-controlled municipal assembly; the province's parliamentary seats split evenly between AKP and CHP. If AKP needs a sign that it is able to fulfill its goal of capturing the mayors' offices in major urban centers where it failed in 2004, Eskisehir is a true bellwether. The city's mayoral race will show AKP how it is doing nationally in convincing voters that it is not to blame for an economy rocked by global events and that it is best placed to continue to lead Turkey through these difficult times, both from the standpoint of the economy and regional security.

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